

A Note on Meter in Egyptian Poetry

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Abstract

The formal analysis of ancient Egyptian poetry has long been characterized by a methodological schism between metrical-numerological and syntactic sense-unit approaches. This paper examines the seminal work of Gerhard Fecht, whose Kolon-based metrical system sought to uncover a hidden grid of numerical harmony, and the robust critique and alternative model offered by Günter Burkard and others, which prioritizes observable syntactic units and manuscript evidence. While Fecht's model is weakened by its reliance on prescriptive numerology and textual emendation, and Burkard's approach may over-privilege the couplet and under-theorize rhythm, a synthesis is possible. By reframing Fecht's "Vers" as a phrasal component composed of 2-3 prosodic words—taking into account both word-level accent and accent at what linguists call the level of the intonational or comma phrase—we can describe a strong-stress metre that stylizes the language's natural rhythm.¹ This synthesized model respects syntactic boundaries and manuscript evidence while accounting for recurrent prosodic patterns, accommodates both couplets and triplets as primary structural units, and explains macro-structure through principles of hierotactic balance rather than abstract numerology.

0.1 Introduction: The Unsolved Problem of Egyptian Meter

For over a century, scholars have debated whether ancient Egyptian poetry possesses a recoverable, rule-governed metre akin to classical traditions, or whether its form is best described through observable rhetorical and syntactic patterns. The consonantal script, which obscures vocalic information crucial for quantifying syllable length or precise stress, seemed to render the first option nearly hopeless, leading Alan Gardiner to deem the problem "wellnigh insoluble."²

This paper navigates the central debate in Egyptian prosodic studies by critically analyzing the two most influential theoretical frameworks: the metrical-numerological system of Gerhard Fecht and the syntactic sense-unit approach advanced by Günter Burkard, Miriam Lichtheim, and John L. Foster.³ It argues that a synthesis of their core insights—one that defines the verse as a syntactic unit whose internal rhythm follows a strong-stress pattern based on prosodic words—provides a more textually accountable and theoretically sound model for understanding Egyptian literary form.

0.2 Gerhard Fecht's Metrical Theory: Foundations, Rules, and Aims

0.3 The Historical Impasse

Gerhard Fecht's seminal 1964 article opens by confronting what was, for over a century, one of the most intractable puzzles in Egyptology: did ancient Egyptian literature possess a formal system of meter, and if so, can we recover it? The absence of vowel notation in hieroglyphic, hieratic, and demotic writing seemed to render the question nearly hopeless. Scholars could perceive rhetorical patterns, wordplay, and parallelism, but the underlying rhythmic skeleton—the metron—remained shrouded in silence.

Fecht's work represents a paradigm shift. He argues that the problem had been approached incorrectly. Previous scholars, notably Adolf Erman and Hermann Junker, had looked to Coptic (the final stage of the Egyptian language, written with vowels) for the key, assuming a direct continuity of metrical principles. This, Fecht contends, was a fundamental error that led to confusion between word accent and sentence accent. His article is not merely another speculative attempt but a methodological treatise that tried to establish a new, rigorous foundation for analysis. It combines theoretical linguistics with practical text criticism to propose a system based on the counting of syntactic stress units within a sentence, which he terms "Kola" (singular: Kolon). That is the first idiosyncrasy of Fecht's approach: the use he makes of the word "Kolon." What he had in mind is what linguists generally call the prosodic word.

0.4 The Historical Impasse: A Critique of Previous Scholarship

Fecht begins with a meticulous review of previous attempts to tackle Egyptian meter, demonstrating why each failed to provide a universally applicable system.

A. The Coptic Mirage: Erman, Junker, and Sāve-Söderbergh

In the late 19th century, Adolf Erman's work on Coptic metrical songs fueled optimism. In his *Bruchstücke koptischer Volksliteratur* (1897), Erman speculated that native Coptic meter, based on word accent, might hold the key to reading older Egyptian verses. This assumption of an essential unity between Coptic and older Egyptian meter was shared by H. Junker and T. Sāve-Söderbergh in their studies of Coptic poetry.

Fecht's Critique: While acknowledging their pioneering work, Fecht identifies their central flaw: the conflation of Wortakzent (word accent) with Satzakzent (sentence or syntactic accent). They treated every fully-vocalized word in Coptic as a stressed unit (a "lift" or *Hebung*), leading to a proliferation of "exceptions" and an overly rigid, irregular scheme. Fecht argues that meter in an accentual language like Egyptian must be based on

the broader, more flexible rhythm of sense units within a sentence—the Kola—not the individual word.

B. Early and Failed Forays into Hieroglyphic Meter

- W. M. Müller (1899): In *Die Liebespoesie der alten Ägypter*, Müller devised a set of accentuation rules for Love Poems but admitted it was only preliminary. Fecht dismisses it as an unsystematic mixture of correct and incorrect guesses.
- H. Junker (1906): In *Poesie der Spätzeit*, Junker analyzed temple songs from Dendera with clear refrains. While he successfully identified strophic structures, his metrical analysis remained dependent on Müller and Erman's faulty principles and thus did not advance the theoretical understanding of meter itself.
- G. Farina (1921): His metrical reconstruction of the Story of Sinuhe was optimistic but produced rules that were not transferable to other texts—a fatal flaw for any proposed metrical system.

C. Growing Pessimism and the Turn to Stylistics

The failures led to skepticism. Erman himself, in later works, grew doubtful about recovering a “strict verse form.” As already noted, Alan Gardiner, in 1931, deemed the problem “wellnigh insoluble.” The most influential turn came from Hermann Grapow (1936), who in *Sprachliche und schriftliche Formung ägyptischer Texte* declared attempts to divide “so-called verses” into accentual units futile given the consonantal script. He advocated instead for the study of stylistic structure—repetition, parallelism, chiasm—which was empirically observable.

Fecht's Stance on Grapow: Fecht respects Grapow's pragmatic shift but sees it as a surrender, not a solution. He agrees that stylistics is crucial but argues that meter and style are inseparable. Recovering the intended meter is, in fact, recovering the most fundamental layer of the author's stylistic design. He aims to prove that beneath the observable stylistic features lies a measurable, rule-governed metrical grid.

D. The Persistent Problems: Vocalization and “Variable” God Names

Fecht addresses two common arguments against recoverable meter:

0.5 Vowelless Script: He counters that knowledge of vowels, while helpful, is not essential. What matters for an accentual meter is the number and position of stressed syllables, which can be deduced from syntactic structures, not their precise vocalic content.

0.6 Divine Epithets: Erman had noted that in hymns, a god's short name could be replaced by a long string of epithets, seemingly disrupting any fixed verse length. Fecht argues this is not a problem for meter but a feature of it. The metrical system was a simple, flexible framework that could accommodate such "insertions" by expanding a line with an extra stress unit or adding a whole new line, much like padding in folk poetry or parody. The aesthetic success depended on the skill of the poet in integrating the expansion harmoniously.

0.7 The Theoretical Foundation: Sentence Accent, Kola, and the Nature of Egyptian Meter

Here Fecht builds his positive theory, drawing on general linguistics and the specific evolution of the Egyptian language.

A. Sentence Accent vs. Word Accent: A Linguistic Primer

Fecht explains the hierarchy of accent:

- Syllable Peak (e.g., the vowel *i* in Zim-mer)
- Word Accent (the stressed syllable of a word: Zim-mer)
- Sentence/Kolon Accent (the primary stress within a continuous spoken phrase: "ich bin im Zimmer").

In languages with strong expiratory (stress) accent, like German and Egyptian, the higher-level accent can phonetically reduce weaker elements. In German, "in dem" becomes contracted to "im"; the unaccented word is reduced and loses its independence.

B. The Key Unit: The Kolon

A Kolon is a sense unit or breath group within a sentence—a sequence of articulation without an obligatory pause. It is subordinate to a single primary stress (the Kolongipfel). The boundaries of Kola are not arbitrary; they are determined by syntax.

- Example: In German, "den-Mann-töten" ("to-kill-the-man") can be one Kolon (close syntactic bond), while "den-Mann töten" could be two (less close).
- Crucially for Egyptian: Fecht posits that certain syntactic bonds always and without exception formed a single Kolon in the classical language (Middle Egyptian). The most important is the direct genitive (noun-noun construction: king-son) and the direct object following an infinitive.

C. Evidence from Language History: The “Status Constructus”

The strongest evidence for these immutable Kola comes from phonetic reduction. When two words formed an extremely close syntactic unit (a Kolon), the first word often lost its stress, leading to a reduced vowel form known in Egyptology as the status constructus. This is visible in:

- Cuneiform Transcriptions (18th-19th Dynasties): Egyptian names and titles transcribed in Akkadian show vowel reduction in the first element of compounds (e.g., mai-amana for mry-Jmn, “beloved-of-Amun”).
- Coptic: The status constructus survives in fossilized forms, like the reduced vowel before a direct object in certain verb forms.

This historical process proves that the Egyptians themselves perceived these syntactic groups as single accentual units. Therefore, we can use these grammatical constructions as objective anchors for identifying Kola in the written text, even without vowels.

D. The Nature of Egyptian Meter: Accentual, Not Quantitative

Fecht establishes that Egyptian meter must be accentual (based on stress count), not quantitative (based on vowel length, as in Greek and Latin). This follows from the known expiratory accent of the language. Furthermore, he eliminates other possible obligatory features:

- No Fixed Rhythm/Takt: There is no evidence for a regular alternation of strong and weak syllables (iambic, trochaic, etc.). Word order is never distorted for rhythmic purposes, as it is in Greek or Latin poetry.
- Alliteration and End-Rhyme are Facultative: They occur as artistic embellishments but are never mandatory structural elements.

The Core of Fechtian Meter: Egyptian verse is founded exclusively on the counting of Kola (i.e., primary sentence stresses) per line. A line (Vers) typically consists of 2 or 3 Kola. A line of 1 Kolon (“monocolon”) is rare and requires clear isolation from its context. A line of 4 Kola is extremely rare. Lines of 5 or more Kola are practically non-existent.

E. Implications for Coptic Meter

Fecht revisits Coptic meter in light of his theory. The Coptic system had become more complex and irregular because:

0.8 The old, strong expiratory accent was weakening and shifting towards a musical accent.

0.9 Many old status constructus forms (single Kola) had been replaced by analytic constructions (e.g., using the particle n- for genitives), which originally represented two Kola but may have been re-fused in speech.

Thus, analyzing Coptic poetry requires using the rules of older Egyptian meter as a guide, not the other way around. The simple system had decayed, leading to the “exceptions” that plagued Erman and Junker.

0.10 The Rule System: A Syntactic Guide to Kola

The heart of Fecht’s practical method is an extensive list of grammatical rules that predict Kolon formation for Middle Egyptian (Middle Kingdom to Late Period). He organizes these alphabetically by syntactic category. Below are the most critical rules with his examples.

A. Foundational Principles

- A Kolon is marked in transliteration by hyphens joining its words.
- The Verse is a relatively closed sense unit, normally of 2 or 3 Kola.
- Larger Units: Verses group into Verse Groups (normally 2 or 3 verses), which in turn build Strophes.

B. Key Rules (Abbreviated from Fecht’s List)

0.11 Adverb: Generally forms its own Kolon. Except: jm (“there”) never does; wr (“very”) when intensifying an adjective does not.

Example: r'-nb (“every day”) = 1 Kolon.

0.12 Apposition: Generally forms its own Kolon.

Example: W3st nwt (“Thebes, the city”) = 2 Kola.

Exception: In fixed divine names or titles, univertation can occur: *Jmn-nb-nswt-t3wj* (“Amun, Lord of the Thrones of the Two Lands”) = 1 Kolon.

0.13 Attribute (Adjective/Participle): Substantive + Attribute is always 1 Kolon.

Example: ntr '3 (“great god”) = 1 Kolon.

This is a cornerstone rule, directly supported by status constructus reduction.

0.14 Genitive:

- o Direct Genitive (Noun + Noun): 1 Kolon. (e.g., *z3-njswt*, “king’s-son”).
- o Indirect Genitive (Noun + n + Noun): 2 Kola. (e.g., z3 n njswt, “son of-the-king”).

Exception: Very fixed expressions like *n-k3-n* (“for the ka of”) may univertate into 1 Kolon.

0.15 Nominal Sentence:

- o Substantive + Substantive: 2 Kola (Subject + Predicate).
- o Adjective/Participle + Subject: The adjective forms no separate Kolon.

Example: ‘3 njswt (“Great is the king”) = ‘3-njswt (1 Kolon).

0.16 Preposition + Noun: The preposition is proclitic; the phrase forms 1 Kolon.

Example: m-h3t.f (“before him”) = 1 Kolon.

0.17 Verbal Sentence:

- o sdm.f + Subject (if pronominal): 1 Kolon. (e.g., sdm.f, “he hears”).
- o sdm.f + Substantive Subject: 2 Kola.
- o sdm.f + Direct Object: Forms 1 Kolon if object is suffix, 2 Kola if object is a noun.

Example: sdm.f st (“he hears it”) = 1 Kolon; sdm.f rmt (“he hears the man”) = 2 Kola.

0.18 Infinitive + Direct Object: 1 Kolon. This is a critical rule, evidenced by Coptic status constructus of the infinitive.

Example: mrrt ntr (“loving god”) = 1 Kolon.

These rules are an attempt to provide an objective, syntactically driven grid. A scribe composing a text would intuitively follow these speech-group patterns, and a modern analyst can recover them.

0.19 Textual Demonstrations: Putting the Theory into Practice

Fecht applies his system to two corpora: the metrically pointed Leiden Amun Hymn and the un-pointed biographical inscriptions from the Urkunden der

18. Dynastie. This proves his system works for both explicitly “poetic” and ostensibly “prosaic” texts.

A. The Leiden Amun Hymn (Papyrus Leiden I 350)

This New Kingdom hymn has verse points (dots separating lines), providing an ancient counterpart to Fecht’s analysis. He analyzes three “chapters.”

Example 1: “Tenth Chapter” (II, 10-15)

The text praises Thebes as the primordial city. Fecht’s transliteration with Kola (hyphens) and verse numbers (superscripts) reveals the structure:

1. mtr-W3st r-nwt-nbt / 2 p3-mw-t3-jm.s m-zp-tpj //

2. jj.n-š’t r-ḥnb-3ḥwt / 3 r-šḥpr-z3tw.s ḥr-q3j ḥpr-t3 //

(“Thebes is more timely than any city, / the water-and-land was in it at the first occasion. // The sand came to measure the fields, / to cause its soil to come into being on the primeval mound, that the earth might come into being.”)

Analysis:

- Line 1: 2 Kola. Rule: *mtr-W3st* (Adj+N, 1 Kolon) + r-nwt-nbt (Prep+N+Adj, 1 Kolon).
- Line 2: 2 Kola. A verbal sentence.
- Line 3: 3 Kola. Infinitive r-šḥpr + object z3tw.s (1 Kolon) + prepositional phrase *ḥr-q3j* (1 Kolon) + verbal clause *ḥpr-t3* (1 Kolon).

Fecht shows the 20 verses are arranged in 5 strophes of 4 verses each, with a predominantly concentric (chiastic) structure (A-B-C-B-A) and a secondary additive structure. The scribe’s verse points are mostly correct, except where he misinterprets a three-verse group as two verses, demonstrating the complexity Fecht’s system can handle.

Example 2: “Hundredth Chapter” (IV, 9-11) – A Cosmogonic Hymn

This 10-verse text describes Amun’s self-creation.

3. šḥr-ḥprw m-zp-tpj / 3 Jmn ḥpr-m-ḥ3t nn-rḥ-bs.f //

4. nn-ḥpr-ntr ḥr-ḥ3t.f / 2 nn-kjj-ntr-kn jn-dd.f-qj.f //

(“He who began coming into being at the first occasion, / Amun who came into being at the beginning, without his secret form being known. // No god

came into being before him, / no other god existed with him to proclaim his form.”)

Analysis:

- The structure is a clear concentric pattern: a 4-verse strophe, a central 2-verse strophe, and a final 4-verse strophe. The central strophe (verses 5-6) emphasizes Amun’s lack of father or mother.
- The meter (2,3 / 2,2 // 3,3 // 2,3 / 2,2) reinforces this, with the central couplet having the highest number of Kola (3 each), marking the thematic climax.

B. “Prosaic” Texts: Biographical Inscriptions

Fecht’s most revolutionary claim is that all lengthy Egyptian texts are metrically structured. He proves this by analyzing tomb autobiographies, which are traditionally considered prose.

Example 3: Biography of Rnj, Mayor of Elkab (Urk. IV, 74, 13-75, 5)

A 9-verse autobiographical statement.

5. (dd.f jw) šms.n.j njswt rk.j / 3 ḥr-rdj.n.j n.f ḥrdw tj //

6. šhj.j ḥpr m-’ / 3 rḥ.n.wj ḥrw m pr.f //

7. pḥ.n.j j’wj m nwt.j //

(“(He says:) I served the king in my time, / I assigned to him lads and men. // My memory endured in the palace, / the Horus (king) knew me in his house. // I attained old age in my city.”)

Analysis:

- Using the rules: šms.n.j njswt (verb+subj. noun: 2 Kola); ḥr-rdj.n.j n.f (verb+dat.+indir. obj.: the dative n.f splits the Kolon, creating 2 Kola) + ḥrdw tj (compound noun: 1 Kolon). Total for line 2: 3 Kola.
- The text has a concentric structure around the central, isolated verse 5 (“I attained old age”):
 - o Verses 1-2: Service to the king (action).
 - o Verses 3-4: Reward and recognition (result).
 - o Verse 5: Central Goal – A ripe old age.
 - o Verses 6-7: Inner motivation for service (heart’s drive).

- o Verses 8-9: Ethical result and lasting fame (inner result).
- The meter alternates between 2 and 3 Kola per line in a patterned way that supports this structure.

Example 4: Biography of Hrw-mjnj, Mayor of Hierakonpolis (Urk. IV, 76, 14-77, 7)

An 8-verse text. Fecht's analysis reveals profound subtlety.

8. jtj.n.j rnpwt '3t m-ḥ3tj-Jwn... / 3 mj.n.j jnw.s n-nb-t3wj / 2 ḥsj.tw nn-gmj.tw-ḥtj.j //

9. ph.n.j j'wj m-W3w3t / 2 jw.j m-mḥ-jb n nb.j //

10. bdd.j ḥr-jnw.s / 2 n njswt nw-rnpt / 3 prj.j jm m-m3'-ḥrw jn-n-gmj.n.tw-d3t.j //

("I spent many years as mayor of Hierakonpolis... / I brought its dues to the lord of the Two Lands, / I was praised, no fault of mine was found. // I attained old age in Wawat, / while I was in the confidence of my lord. // That I sailed down with its dues / to the king was yearly; / that I came out thence as one vindicated, without any deficit of mine being found.")

Amphiboly and Deep Structure: Fecht's masterstroke is identifying an amphiboly (double meaning) in the final verse. The "geminating" verb form (prj.j, "that I come out") and the timeless negation (n-gmj.n.tw, "is not found") allow the last line to be read on two levels:

10.1 Earthly Level: His annual tax deliveries were always found in order.

10.2 Otherworldly Level: His emergence from the afterlife tribunal as "vindicated" (*m3'-ḥrw*), with his heart not found wanting on the scales of justice.

This double meaning is confirmed by the meter and structure:

- The outer verses (1 and 8) each have 3 Kola, framing the entire text.
- The concentric structure is: Life & Service (V.1-3) – Old Age & Reward (V.4-5) – Service & Justification (V.6-8).
- Thus, the first verse speaks of his earthly life, the central verses of his successful career, and the final verse of his ultimate, posthumous justification. The meter (3-2 / 2-2 / 2-3) chiastically mirrors this frame.

This analysis shows how meter is not just a formal constraint but an active tool for generating sophisticated, multilayered meaning.

10.3 The “Verse Points”: Ancient Support for the Theory

Fecht addresses the red dots in New Kingdom manuscripts that are often called “verse points.” His theory explains them:

- Why they appear only from the New Kingdom onward? The living, spoken language’s sentence accent began to diverge from the classical, literary meter (based on Middle Egyptian). Scribes needed an artificial aid to preserve the traditional recitation rhythm during performance. The points are a didactic tool, not an authorial notation.
- Why are they often “wrong”? Because scribes sometimes misinterpreted the structure, especially trying to force three-verse groups into simpler two-verse pairs. Their errors are systematic and understandable within Fecht’s framework, and the fact that correctly pointed verses align perfectly with his rules validates both the points and his system.

10.4 Conclusion: The Essence and Scope of Egyptian Literary Form

Fecht concludes by reflecting on the implications of his discovery.

10.5 Simplicity and Power: The Egyptian metrical system is “of unimaginable simplicity.” It uses only one obligatory device: the grouping of speech into counted Kola (2 or 3 per line) and the stacking of these lines into larger units. From this simple principle, works of extreme complexity and refinement could be built through patterns of alternation, chiasm, and ring composition.

10.6 Universal Application: He asserts that metrical form is the norm, not the exception. It governs not just “literature” (teachings, narratives) but also hymns, prayers, magical texts, tomb inscriptions, and even lengthy official texts. The only unformed texts are very short notes. Egyptian artistic expression in language, as in visual art, was inherently driven by a tendency toward “order, clarity of proportions, and harmony.”

10.7 Meter and Meaning: The formal analysis is not an end in itself. It is the key to unlocking a deeper understanding of the text—its intended phrasing, its emphasis, its logical pauses (replacing missing punctuation), and its layered structure, which is always wedded to the content. As his analysis of Hrw-mjnj’s biography shows, the meter can be the vehicle for profound amphibolic meaning.

A Bridge Too Far

Gerhard Fecht's article deliberately transcends a technical study of meter. It attempts to provide a generative grammar for Egyptian literary composition. He sought to redefine the very concept of "form" in ancient Egyptian literature.

Ultimately, he arrived at an astonishingly simple formula to explain literary form in both poetry and prose. Treating things like syntactic and semantic parallelisms in verse and local examples of sound orchestration as artistic embellishments of no structural significance, he concluded that the sole obligatory principle of Egyptian metre, in verse and prose, is the counting of Kola per verse.¹⁵

This is no doubt a bridge too far. As we shall see, Burkard's critique is compelling. Yet Fecht's attempt to identify rules for identifying his "Kola" are still worth considering.

10.8 The Rule System for Identifying Kola

10.8.1 Foundational Principles

Fecht developed an extensive set of grammatical rules to predict Kolon formation in Middle Egyptian texts. In transliteration, Kola are marked by hyphens joining their constituent words.

The basic metrical unit, the Vers, is a relatively closed sense-unit normally consisting of two or three Kola. Verses group into Verse Groups, usually of two or three verses, which in turn form larger units such as Teilstrophen, Strophen, Gesänge, and Kapitel. The aesthetic form of a work emerges from the hierarchical arrangement of these units into a coherent whole.¹⁶

10.8.2 Core Syntactic Rules

Fecht organizes his Kolon-formation rules by syntactic category. The most important principles include the following:

Adverbs generally form their own Kolon. Exceptions include *jm* ("there"), which never does, and *wr* ("very") when it intensifies an adjective. Thus *r'-nb* ("every day") constitutes one Kolon.

Apposition normally forms two Kola, as in *W3st nwt* ("Thebes, the city"). In fixed divine names or titles, however, universion may occur, producing a single Kolon, for example *Jmn-nb-nswt-t3wj* ("Amun, Lord of the Thrones of the Two Lands").

A substantive with its attribute—whether adjective or participle—always forms one Kolon. Thus *ntr '3* ("great god") is a single Kolon. This rule is directly supported by evidence from status constructus reduction.

Genitive constructions are divided into two types. The direct genitive (noun + noun), as in z3-njswt (“king’s son”), forms one Kolon. The indirect genitive (noun + n + noun), as in z3 n njswt (“son of the king”), normally forms two Kola. Exceptionally fixed expressions such as n-k3-n (“for the ka of”) may univertate into one Kolon.

In nominal sentences, a substantive plus substantive typically forms two Kola (subject and predicate). By contrast, an adjective or participle plus subject forms one Kolon, as in ‘3 njswt (“Great is the king”), which Fecht marks as ‘3-njswt.

Prepositions are proclitic. A preposition plus noun therefore forms one Kolon, for example m-ḥ3t.f (“before him”).

In verbal sentences, sdm.f with a pronominal subject forms one Kolon. When the subject is a substantive noun, the construction forms two Kola. If the direct object is a suffix, it remains within the same Kolon; if it is a noun, it forms a second Kolon. Thus sdm.f st (“he hears it”) is one Kolon, while sdm.f rmt (“he hears the man”) is two.

Finally, the infinitive followed by its direct object always forms one Kolon. This rule is supported by the status constructus behavior of the infinitive in Coptic. Thus mr̥rt nṯr (“loving god”) is a single Kolon.¹⁷

Together, these rules provide what Fecht describes as an objective, syntactically driven grid. A scribe composing a text would intuitively follow these speech-group patterns, and a modern analyst can recover them without relying on speculative vocalization.

r’s *Poesie der Spätzeit* (1906) successfully identified strophic structures in temple songs from Dendera but remained dependent on Müller and Erman’s faulty principles. G. Farina’s metrical reconstruction of the Story of Sinuhe (1921) produced rules that were not transferable to other texts, rendering them theoretically unusable.

10.9 Textual Demonstrations

10.9.1 The Leiden Amun Hymn

Fecht’s most influential demonstration of his metrical system is his analysis of the Amun Hymn preserved in Papyrus Leiden I 350. This text is particularly valuable because it contains verse points, which Fecht interprets as indicators of Kolon and verse boundaries.

Applying his rules, Fecht divides the hymn into five strophes of four verses each. Each verse consists of two or three Kola, and the strophes are arranged in a concentric pattern (A–B–C–B–A). The central strophe (C)

exhibits the highest average number of Kola per verse, marking it as the thematic and rhetorical climax of the composition.

Fecht argues that this structural symmetry is not accidental but reflects an intentional aesthetic principle. The hymn's formal organization reinforces its theological message by placing the most exalted description of Amun's power at the center of the composition. Metrical variation thus functions as a tool of semantic emphasis.¹⁸

The Leiden Hymn also illustrates the flexibility of the Kolon system. Where the poet wishes to expand a divine epithet or introduce additional descriptive material, this is achieved not by distorting syntax but by adding further Kola or entire verses. The underlying two-to-three-Kolon structure of the verse remains intact.

10.9.2 Biographical Inscriptions

Fecht extends his metrical analysis beyond hymns to include texts traditionally classified as prose, especially tomb autobiographies and monumental inscriptions. He argues that these texts are likewise governed by the same Kolon-based verse structure, even when verse points are not preserved.

A key example is the autobiography of Rnj of Elkab. Fecht divides the text into a concentric structure centered on the motif of attaining old age in divine favor. The surrounding verses narrate Rnj's loyal service and moral integrity, while the central section emphasizes his blessed longevity. The symmetrical distribution of Kola and verse groups mirrors the thematic symmetry of the narrative.

An even more striking case is the biography of Hrw-mjnj of Hierakonpolis. The concluding passage contains an amphiboly—a statement that can be read on two levels:

Earthly level: Hrw-mjnj's annual deliveries of taxes were always found in proper order.

Otherworldly level: He emerged vindicated from the judgment of the dead as m3'-ḥrw ("true of voice").

Fecht argues that the metrical structure reinforces this double meaning. The distribution of Kola creates a chiasmic pattern that aligns the earthly and eschatological interpretations. The formal design thus participates in the semantic ambiguity of the text.¹⁹

Through such examples, Fecht seeks to demonstrate that metre is not limited to explicitly “poetic” genres but permeates Egyptian literary production as a whole.

10.10 Verse Points and Scribal Transmission

Verse points (Gliederungspunkte) appear primarily in New Kingdom manuscripts and later copies of classical texts. Fecht interprets them not as arbitrary scribal aids but as markers of an inherited recitation tradition.

He argues that as spoken Egyptian changed over time, the rhythmic patterns of earlier compositions became less intuitively accessible. Verse points were therefore introduced in scribal training contexts to preserve the correct articulation of classical texts. In this sense, they functioned as pedagogical tools rather than as original compositional devices.²⁰

Fecht further maintains that apparent “errors” in the placement of verse points often reflect an underlying attempt to impose preferred structural patterns, especially the grouping of verses into pairs or triplets. When scribes encountered sequences of three verses, they sometimes re-divided them into two-plus-one patterns more in line with later aesthetic expectations.

The systematic nature of these deviations, Fecht claims, supports rather than undermines his theory. They show that scribes were actively engaging with a perceived metrical structure, even when they misunderstood or reshaped it.²¹

10.11 Fecht’s Conception of Egyptian Literary Form

Fecht repeatedly emphasizes the simplicity of the Egyptian metrical system. In contrast to the elaborate quantitative metres of Greek and Latin poetry, Egyptian verse rests on what he calls an “unimaginably simple” principle: the formation of verses from two or three Kola.²²

The artistic complexity of Egyptian literature, he argues, does not lie in the internal mechanics of individual verses but in the large-scale organization of texts. Verses combine into verse groups, verse groups into strophes, and strophes into larger compositional units such as hymns, narratives, or inscriptions.

The aesthetic effect of a work emerges from the hierarchical arrangement of these units into balanced and often symmetrical structures. Fecht compares

this process to architectural design or polyphonic music, where the beauty of the whole depends on the proportional integration of simple elements.²³

Fecht also maintains that metrical form governs nearly all extended Egyptian texts, including hymns, narratives, royal inscriptions, and even administrative compositions. Stylistic features such as alliteration, parallelism, and wordplay are secondary and optional; they operate within the constraints of Kolon-based verse structure.

For Fecht, formal analysis is therefore indispensable for interpretation. Without attention to metre, the reader risks missing the intended emphasis, the rhetorical climaxes, and the symbolic architecture of a text. Metrical structure, in his view, is not an ornament but a fundamental carrier of meaning.²⁴

10.12 Numerology and Its Discontents

10.13 Fecht's Numerological Aesthetic

Beyond the basic Kolon-based structure of individual verses, Fecht posits that the large-scale organization of Egyptian literary texts is governed by numerological principles. Certain numbers, especially 7 and 9 (and their multiples), are said to possess aesthetic and symbolic significance. These numbers allegedly determine the total count of verses, verse groups, or strophes in a composition.

According to Fecht, a text achieves its highest artistic form when its structural units are arranged into numerically harmonious patterns. Verse groups combine into strophes, strophes into larger sections, and these sections into a complete composition whose overall architecture reflects sacred numerical ratios. He likens this arrangement to a "multilayered polyphonic musical work," in which different structural levels resonate with one another.²⁵

In this framework, stylistic devices such as alliteration, wordplay, amphiboly, semantic oppositions, and even parallelismus membrorum are considered facultative rather than constitutive. They enhance the aesthetic effect but remain subordinate to the numerological structure of the text.²⁶

10.14 The 17-Line Problem

A well-known example illustrates the methodological risks of this approach. In a Ramesside love song, Schott had divided the text into twenty verses, grouped into five strophes of four lines each. Fecht rejected this division and instead reconstructed a seventeen-verse structure in order to achieve a numerologically significant total.

To produce this result, Fecht disregarded three transmitted verse points. He argued that these points were secondary and did not reflect the original structure of the composition. The reconstructed seventeen-line form, he maintained, better expressed the text's aesthetic and symbolic design.

Burkard objects that this procedure reverses the proper relationship between evidence and theory. Rather than deriving structure from the manuscript tradition, Fecht imposes a numerological ideal onto the text. The resulting form may be aesthetically appealing, but it lacks textual accountability.²⁷

Similar problems arise in Fecht's analysis of *Sinuhe*, where the number nine plays a prominent role. Although Fecht identifies complex numerical patterns in the third chapter of the narrative, the proposed metrical segmentation requires the systematic disregard of transmitted division markers. The symbolic structure is thus achieved only at the cost of overriding the documentary evidence.²⁸

10.15 Methodological Risks

Burkard and other critics identify several recurring problems in Fecht's numerological method.

First, the extensive freedom allowed in dividing Kola into verses creates a large interpretive margin. A sequence of six Kola, for example, can be read as three two-Kolon verses or as two three-Kolon verses. This flexibility undermines the claim that specific numerical outcomes are objectively grounded in the text.²⁹

Second, numerological expectations often lead to artificial segmentation, including the creation of single-word Kola or the forced separation of tightly bound syntactic units. Such divisions contradict Fecht's own linguistic principles and weaken the internal coherence of the system.

Third, the prioritization of numerical harmony frequently marginalizes *parallelismus membrorum*, which is widely recognized as a central organizing principle of ancient Near Eastern poetry. When numerical symmetry conflicts with semantic parallelism, Fecht regularly subordinates the latter to the former.³⁰

Finally, the method encourages "formal emendations" of the textual tradition. Verse points and other transmitted markers are dismissed as erroneous whenever they interfere with the desired numerical structure. This practice risks circular reasoning: the theory defines the structure, and the structure is then cited as evidence for the theory.³¹

For these reasons, Burkard concludes that while Fecht's system provides a powerful tool for structuring Egyptian texts, its numerological component lacks methodological rigor. The aesthetic satisfaction of numerical symmetry should not be confused with historical plausibility.³²

10.16 Burkard and the Sense-Unit Model

4.1 Core Principles

In response to the perceived shortcomings of Fecht's metrical-numerological system, Günter Burkard—building on the work of Miriam Lichtheim and John L. Foster—advances an alternative approach that defines the verse not by the number of Kola it contains, but by its status as a syntactically closed sense-unit.

According to this model, a verse is an absolute, grammatically delimited unit: a full sentence, a clause, or a syntactically self-contained phrase. Unlike Fecht's relative verse, which is defined primarily by Kolon-counting, the sense-unit verse is determined by observable linguistic boundaries.³³

Burkard emphasizes that this approach is grounded in manuscript evidence. In texts that preserve verse points, these markers overwhelmingly coincide with grammatical and syntactic boundaries. Studies of the Nile Hymn, for example, show that verse points almost always fall at clause or phrase endings. They are not arbitrary or pedagogical additions but reflect an original compositional principle.³⁴

A crucial implication follows: if verses correspond to sense-units, then enjambment is not possible in Egyptian poetry. A verse ends where a syntactic unit ends. What modern readers might perceive as enjambment is in fact the continuation of a larger syntactic structure that has not yet reached closure.³⁵

Burkard also stresses that Egyptian literary texts exhibit multiple formal genres, not a single universal metrical system. Following Lichtheim, he distinguishes at least three broad categories: prose, intermediate or "orational" style, and poetry. Foster further subdivides poetic texts into narrative verse, hortatory couplets, and lyric verse. Each genre has its own formal tendencies, even if all rely on the sense-unit as their basic building block.³⁶

Within a verse, Burkard acknowledges the presence of accentual rhythm, but he denies that a fixed number of stresses or Kola can be reconstructed. The internal rhythm of a sense-unit depends on its syntactic and semantic

composition, not on an abstract numerical scheme. Unstressed syllables may vary freely in number, and no strict count of “beats” can be established.³⁷

4.2 Defining the Sense-Unit

[Original text retained here.]

4.3 Parallelismus Membrorum and the Problem of Couplet Absolutization

For Burkard, as for Lichtheim and Foster, parallelismus membrorum is a central formal principle of Egyptian poetry. Verses are typically arranged in pairs (bicola), in which two sense-units mirror one another syntactically, semantically, or both. This model aligns Egyptian poetry with broader ancient Near Eastern traditions, where parallelism functions as the main structuring mechanism of verse discourse.

However, both Foster and Burkard tend to treat the thought couplet not merely as a frequent pattern but as the default higher-level building block of Egyptian poetry. Foster, in particular, structures extended compositions such as *The Shipwrecked Sailor* primarily into thought couplets, with other groupings treated as secondary. Burkard, though more cautious, still describes the couplet as the “next higher formal building block,” while triplets and larger units are classified as variants.⁴⁰

This privileging of the couplet introduces a theoretical rigidity that is not consistently supported by the evidence. It implies that Egyptian poets primarily conceived discourse in binary terms, even when rhetorical progression clearly unfolds in triadic or multi-stage structures.

4.4 The Structural Centrality of Thought Triplets

A growing body of evidence indicates that thought triplets—groups of three syntactically closed sense-units forming a coherent rhetorical or thematic unit—are not marginal phenomena but structurally central in many Egyptian compositions.

The Accession Hymn of Merneptah in Papyrus Sallier I provides a particularly clear example. The hymn unfolds in a sequence of nine principal lines, followed by a prosperity coda. These lines do not organize themselves primarily into paired couplets. Instead, they form rhetorically progressive groupings best described as triplets:

Lines 1–3: Acclamation and emotional response

Lines 4–5 / 6–7: Epiphany and restoration of justice

Lines 8–9: Climactic affirmation

Lines 10–12: Prosperity coda

Each triplet forms a coherent rhetorical movement characterized by introduction, intensification, and resolution. Forcing these sequences into binary couplets fractures the thematic progression, separating elements that clearly belong together as a single semantic unit.

4.5 Scribal Straitjacketing into Couplets

Diachronic evidence further supports this conclusion. In later periods, especially in school texts and Ramesside miscellanies, scribes increasingly regularized verse into binary couplets. This standardization appears to reflect pedagogical or stylistic preferences rather than original compositional practice.

Fecht was likely correct in observing that later scribes tended to “straitjacket” earlier, more flexible verse structures into neat binary formats.

4.6 Reassessing Burkard’s Critique of Fecht

Burkard rightly criticizes Fecht’s reliance on numerology and his willingness to override manuscript evidence. However, Burkard’s own insistence on the primacy of the thought couplet introduces a different form of formal absolutism.

Fecht’s concept of the *Versgruppe*—a grouping of two or three verses—was, in this respect, more descriptively flexible.

4.7 Sense-Unit Nesting as a More Adequate Model

A more robust framework abandons the assumption that the couplet is the default higher-level unit. Instead, it recognizes a principle of sense-unit nesting:

The verse is a syntactically closed sense-unit.

These sense-units group into rhetorically coherent clusters.

Clusters may consist of two, three, or more verses.

Grouping is determined by rhetorical progression, thematic development, and semantic weight.

Couplets suit contrast and equivalence.

Triplets suit progression and climax.
Larger groupings suit narrative or theological exposition.

10.17 Core Principles

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10.18 Defining the "Sense-Unit"

The decisive methodological issue is the definition of the “sense-unit.” Burkard defines it as a syntactically independent unit, which may take several forms:

A complete main clause

A subordinate clause

A syntactically closed phrase

In some cases, a combination of two short clauses forming a “two-element line”

While a full sentence can constitute a verse, this is not the norm. More commonly, verses correspond to syntactic sub-units such as predicate-subject, participle-object, or nominal phrases.³⁸

Burkard observes that syntactic expansion affects verse structure. When a basic clause pattern (e.g., Predicate-Subject-Object) is extended by adjectives, adverbs, particles, indirect objects, or genitives, the entire expanded unit still forms a single verse—unless stylistic principles such as parallelism motivate a different division.

The decisive criteria for verse division are therefore:

Syntactic closure

Stylistic symmetry

Semantic balance

Parallelismus membrorum

A brief example illustrates the principle:

dwꜣ=j nwb.t | sswꜣ=j ḥm=s
sqꜣ=j nb.t p.t

“I worship the Golden One, I praise her Majesty;
I exalt the Lady of Heaven.”

Here, each line forms a complete syntactic and semantic unit. The parallelism of structure and meaning confirms the verse division.³⁹

10.19 Parallelismus Membrorum as Primary Organizing Principle

For Burkard, parallelism is not a secondary stylistic device but the primary formal principle of Egyptian poetry. Verses are typically arranged in pairs

(bicola), in which two sense-units mirror each other syntactically, semantically, or both.

This principle aligns Egyptian poetry with broader ancient Near Eastern poetic traditions, where parallelism functions as the main structuring mechanism. Semantic balance, repetition, and variation create cohesion and rhetorical force.

When numerical symmetry conflicts with parallelism, Burkard insists that parallelism must take precedence. A verse division that disrupts a clear parallel structure is methodologically suspect, even if it produces a numerologically “harmonious” total.⁴⁰

10.20 Hierotaxis and Proportional Balance

Burkard also introduces the concept of hierotaxis—the proportional arrangement of textual units according to their semantic weight. Not all verses are equal in importance. Central statements, climactic declarations, and theological assertions may be longer, more elaborate, or more prominently positioned than supporting material.

This principle explains why Egyptian texts often display asymmetrical structures. A longer verse or a tripartite sequence may serve to highlight a crucial idea, without requiring the entire composition to conform to a rigid numerical pattern.⁴¹

Hierotaxis thus provides a more flexible explanation of textual architecture than Fecht’s numerology. Balance emerges from semantic emphasis rather than from abstract numerical symbolism.

10.21 Critique of Fecht’s System

Burkard acknowledges the lasting value of Fecht’s work. Fecht developed the first comprehensive method for structuring Egyptian texts and emphasized the importance of analyzing the text as a whole rather than as isolated lines. These contributions remain fundamental.⁴²

Nevertheless, Burkard identifies several systemic weaknesses:

First, Fecht’s “metre” may simply describe the natural rhythm of Egyptian speech rather than a distinct poetic system. The universality of the Kolon-based structure across genres suggests that it reflects general prosody rather than verse-specific rules.⁴³

Second, the freedom allowed in dividing Kola into verses introduces subjectivity. Whether six Kola form three bicola or two tricola often depends on the analyst’s preference rather than on objective criteria.

Third, Fecht's reliance on numerology leads to the marginalization of parallelism and to frequent disregard of transmitted verse points.

Fourth, the practice of formal emendation—removing or adding division markers to fit an idealized structure—undermines the reliability of the textual tradition.

For Burkard, the sense-unit model offers a more textually accountable, linguistically grounded, and methodologically restrained framework for analyzing Egyptian poetry.⁴⁴

10.22 Toward a Synthesis

The opposition between Fecht's Kolon-based metrical system and Burkard's syntactic sense-unit model need not be absolute. Each approach identifies a genuine feature of Egyptian poetic form. Fecht correctly recognized the importance of accentual rhythm and hierarchical structuring, while Burkard rightly emphasized the primacy of syntactic closure, parallelism, and manuscript evidence. A more satisfactory model emerges when these insights are integrated through the lens of modern prosodic theory.

10.23 The Prosodic Word (ω)

The key to this synthesis is the concept of the prosodic word (ω). Cross-linguistic research has shown that in stress-accent languages, every lexical word must carry exactly one primary stress. To lack a primary stress is, in effect, not to be a word at all. Prosodic words, not orthographic words, are the minimal perceptual units of speech.⁴⁵

Prosodic words are identifiable in acoustic data through correlates such as duration, intensity, vowel quality, and pitch movement. By contrast, phonemes, morae, syllables, and orthographic word divisions are analytical abstractions that do not correspond directly to hearable units in natural speech.⁴⁶

In many languages, including Egyptian's later descendant Coptic and its Semitic neighbors, prosodic word boundaries do not always coincide with written word boundaries. Function words may cliticize onto adjacent lexical words, forming a single prosodic unit, while long or compound lexical items may carry more than one stress.

This insight clarifies Fecht's Kolon concept. What Fecht described as a Kolon corresponds closely to a phrasal grouping of prosodic words unified by

a single primary stress. His linguistic rules for Kolon formation—especially those based on the status constructus and tight syntactic bonds—can be reinterpreted as rules for prosodic word grouping rather than as the basis of a numerically regulated metre.

10.24 Reframing the Kolon

In the synthesized model, the Kolon is no longer treated as the fundamental metrical unit. Instead, it is understood as a phrasal component within a syntactic sense-unit. Each such component typically contains between one and three prosodic words.

A verse, defined as a syntactically closed sense-unit, is therefore composed of two or three phrasal components, yielding common patterns such as 2:2, 2:3, 3:2, or 3:3 in terms of prosodic-word groupings.

The Rarity of the Single-Word "Kolon"/Prosodic Word Unit

Your guess is almost certainly right. In a strongly accentual, stylized poetic line, a single prosodic word standing alone as a full component would be highly unusual and rhythmically weak. It would create a jarring, truncated effect.

- Natural Language Phrasing: Meaning is built from phrases. A single word like "King" (nsw) in a hymn is almost invariably modified or paired: "The King," "The good King," "King of Upper and Lower Egypt." These natural syntactic groupings create multi-word prosodic units.
- Evidence from the Hymn: Look at the lines. What could be construed as a single-stress unit? Perhaps the interjection 'nh-(w)d-s(nb) ("L,P,H!"). But even that is a ritualized, fused phrase. Other likely candidates, like <h:> nb ("A Ruler"), are still two-word units (indefinite article + noun). True single-word cola would require artificial, non-syntactic pauses.
- Fecht's Dilemma: To maintain his strict numerical schema (e.g., a verse must be 2 or 3 cola), he would sometimes be forced to treat a complex phrase as a single "Kolon" or, conversely, to split a natural phrase to create an extra unit. This is where his "excessive formal emendations" (Burkard's criticism) come into play. Creating a single-word kolon is often a tell-tale sign of the system being forced.

This reframing preserves Fecht's insight that Egyptian verse is organized around recurring accentual groupings, while avoiding the rigid Kolon-counting that led to numerological speculation. The number of unstressed syllables within each component remains variable, as Burkard and Foster emphasize, but the number of stressed units is perceptually constrained.

10.25 Strong-Stress Meter

When described in these terms, Egyptian verse can be characterized as a strong-stress, or pure tonic, metre. Such metres regulate the number of stressed units per line but allow considerable freedom in the number of unstressed syllables.

This type of metre is well attested cross-linguistically, for example in Old English alliterative verse and in various Germanic traditions. In these systems, the rhythmic structure is governed by the recurrence of stresses rather than by syllable count or vowel quantity.

The absence of fixed rhythmic feet, the flexibility of unstressed material, and the lack of obligatory rhyme or alliteration in Egyptian poetry all align naturally with a strong-stress model. Egyptian verse does not impose an external metrical grid onto syntax; instead, it stylizes the natural rhythm of speech by regularizing the distribution of stresses across syntactic units.⁴⁷

10.26 Couplets, Triplets, and Hierotaxis (Revised)

The sense-unit model explains why Egyptian poetry so frequently employs bicola. Many thoughts, especially those involving contrast, equivalence, or dialogic exchange, are naturally expressed in paired structures.

Parallelismus membrorum thus remains a dominant organizing principle.

At the same time, Egyptian poetry makes extensive and rhetorically strategic use of tricola and larger groupings. Climactic statements, theological assertions, and progressive arguments often require three sense-units to achieve their semantic and pragmatic force. These triplets are not irregularities but integral components of Egyptian compositional practice.

Rather than attributing such variation to symbolic numerology, the synthesized model explains it through hierotaxis—the proportional arrangement of textual units according to semantic weight. Central ideas receive more formal space; supporting material is expressed more compactly.

Symmetry, when it occurs, is therefore an outcome of rhetorical design rather than a governing rule.

The sense-unit model explains why Egyptian poetry so frequently employs bicola. Many thoughts, especially those involving contrast, equivalence, or elaboration, are naturally expressed in paired structures. Parallelismus membrorum thus emerges as the default organizing principle for Egyptian verse.

At the same time, the model accommodates tricola and more complex structures. Climactic statements, theological assertions, or rhetorically marked passages often require three phrasal components to achieve their semantic and pragmatic force.

Rather than attributing such variation to symbolic numerology, the synthesized model explains it through hierotaxis—the proportional arrangement of textual units according to their semantic weight. Central or climactic ideas receive more formal space, while supporting material is expressed more compactly.

Symmetry, when it occurs, is therefore an outcome of rhetorical design rather than a governing rule. Egyptian poets sought balance and coherence, but they were not constrained by abstract numerical templates.

10.27 Case Study: The Accession Hymn of Merneptah (pSallier I)

Papyrus Sallier I (BM 10185), recto viii 7–ix 1

A Hymn of Praise of Merneptah

A hymn beginning “Let your heart be glad!” which celebrates, as noted by Wilson (ANET³, 378), the accession of Merneptah to the throne (1213–1203 bce)). It is preserved in Papyrus Sallier I (BM 10185), recto viii 7–ix 1, a miscellany of texts copied for scribal instruction. It is dated to the reign of Sethos II (1202–1198 bce) by TLA; a scant decade after the hymn’s presumed date of composition (online:

https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/Y_EA10185-5 and https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/Y_EA10185-6; a facsimile: Budge, *Egyptian Hieratic Papyri in the British Museum*, 2nd ser., pls. LX–LXI; hieroglyphic transcription: Gardiner, *Late-Egyptian Miscellanies*, 86–87).

The hymn’s language reflects standard royal-ideological formulae known from monumental inscriptions. It appears in the papyrus as the quoted content of a letter from an archivist to a scribe to copy out. It is written in the vernacular register of the period rather than in the archaizing literary style typical of royal inscriptions carved on temple walls or stelae. In its vernacular form, the hymn represents how it would have been performed *coram populo*, in contrast to a monumental version (no longer extant) designed for display *coram Deo*.

The text as such provides a rare glimpse into a hymnic style that is not preserved in monumental inscriptions. The style of the hymn in the vernacular is closer to that found in biblical hymnody. It is more exclamatory and contains direct address to the audience with concomitant

characterization of the audience. It deploys the righteous/wicked polarity of much moral instruction. An expression like “All ye righteous, come and see!” is not attested in monumental inscriptions. The signs of this text have been construed in that sense since Adolf Erman; not everyone concurs.

The body of the hymn parses well into a set of nine consecutive intermingled tricola and bicola in a free accentual metrical style comparable, once again, in essentials if not in detail, to that of biblical hymnody. I omit the epistolary introduction. The transliteration is culled from TLA. The translation is my own.

The segmentation into nine lines tracks the logic of the whole:

10.28 Opening acclamation

2-3. epiphany-blessing / justice restored

4-5. Titulary-blessing

6-7 Doxology-Throne name-blessing

8-9. Call to come and see the moral reversal

There is a rhetorical buildup and a thematic progression: acclamation → epiphany → titulary → epithets → call to come and see → moral climax. Parallelism and intensification occur within lines and across contiguous lines.

A prosperity coda, a run of triadic lines, is the finale. It remains within the hymnic register, culminating in the affirmation “It lives in laughter and wonder.”

The coda catalogs:

10.29 Hydrological stability (the water stands tall, the Nile is high)

10.30 Temporal order and cosmic regularity (days long, nights ordered)

10.31 Divine satisfaction (gods at rest), human well-being (life in joy)

It is neither a prayer nor praise in the narrow sense. It is a verification list: a phenomenological confirmation that Maat has been restored.

While the body of the hymn exhibits features comparable to biblical prayer and hymnody—exclamatory openings, direct audience address, and moral polarization—the prosperity coda reflects a distinctly Egyptian mode of closure, consisting of an enumerative confirmation of cosmic and social order rather than a doxological or petitionary conclusion, though it serves a doxological purpose.

The subsequent formulas “May you know it” and “The end” belong to the epistolary framework and should not be regarded as part of the hymn proper.

10.32 Summary of the Synthesized Model

The integrated approach to Egyptian poetic form may be summarized as follows:

The verse is a syntactically closed sense-unit.

Internal rhythm is governed by the distribution of prosodic words (stresses), not by syllable counts.

Phrasal components (Fecht’s Kola) are groupings of 1–3 prosodic words within the verse.

Parallelism is the primary organizing principle of multi-verse structures.

Hierotaxis explains variation in verse length and compositional balance.

Numerology may reflect aesthetic preferences but is not a reliable explanatory principle.

This model retains Fecht’s sensitivity to prosodic patterning and large-scale structure while grounding analysis in syntactic evidence and manuscript tradition, as emphasized by Burkard and Foster.

10.33 Case Study: The Accession Hymn of Merneptah (Papyrus Sallier I)

The Accession Hymn of Merneptah, preserved in Papyrus Sallier I (BM 10185), recto viii 7–ix 1, provides an instructive case study for the synthesized model proposed above. The text is transmitted within a Ramesside miscellany used for scribal instruction and is generally dated to the early Twentieth Dynasty. The hymn celebrates the accession of

Merneptah and the restoration of *mꜣ't* (cosmic and social order) following a period of disorder.

Unlike many Egyptian literary compositions, this hymn is written in a form that strongly suggests verse structure. The language is elevated, the syntax is compact, and the content unfolds in a sequence of rhetorically balanced statements. Although the manuscript does not preserve explicit verse points throughout, the internal organization of the text is recoverable on syntactic and prosodic grounds.

10.34 General Structure

The body of the hymn consists of nine principal lines, followed by a brief coda concerned with prosperity and abundance. Each line corresponds to a syntactically closed sense-unit. Most lines divide naturally into two phrasal components, while a smaller number exhibit three. These components are best described as groupings of one to three prosodic words, unified by a single primary stress.

The result is a strong-stress rhythmic pattern that stylizes the natural prosody of Egyptian speech without imposing a rigid syllabic or quantitative framework. The distribution of stresses is regular enough to produce a perceptible rhythm, yet flexible enough to accommodate syntactic and semantic variation.

10.35 Thematic Progression

The hymn opens with a call to rejoicing, framing the accession of the king as a collective emotional response rather than merely a political event. The heart (*jb*) is addressed as the seat of joy, signaling that the restoration of order is experienced internally as well as externally.

Subsequent lines describe the king's role in reestablishing *mꜣ't*. Chaos is subdued, justice is restored, and the social fabric is repaired. The king is not merely a ruler but the agent through whom divine order is realized on earth.

The hymn culminates in a declaration of stability: the land is secure, the gods are satisfied, and Egypt stands firm under Merneptah's rule. This climax is expressed in a line that is slightly more expansive than the surrounding ones, containing three phrasal components instead of two. The additional formal space reflects the semantic weight of the statement.⁴⁸

10.36 Prosodic Organization

Each verse corresponds to a syntactic sense-unit. Within each verse, the phrasal components are aligned with prosodic word groupings. These components typically contain:

A lexical core (noun, verb, or participle)

Any tightly bound modifiers or complements

Cliticized function words

The number of unstressed syllables varies freely, but the number of stressed lexical units remains relatively stable. This confirms the applicability of a strong-stress model.

The rhythmic structure is thus neither purely “metrical” in Fecht’s sense nor purely “prosaic” in Burkard’s sense. It reflects a stylized speech rhythm shaped by poetic convention.

10.37 Parallelism and Balance

Several lines exhibit clear *parallelismus membrorum*. For example, statements about the defeat of disorder are paired with statements about the restoration of justice. The parallelism is primarily semantic and syntactic rather than phonetic.

This supports Burkard’s claim that parallelism is the primary organizing principle of Egyptian poetry. At the same time, the regularity of stress distribution confirms Fecht’s insight that accentual patterning plays a significant role in shaping the verse.

10.38 The Prosperity Coda

The final section of the hymn shifts from political and cosmic themes to concrete images of abundance: food, drink, and agricultural prosperity. This coda differs slightly in tone and structure from the main body.

The lines are shorter, and the imagery is more concrete. Rather than emphasizing the king’s cosmic role, the focus is on the tangible benefits of stable rule. The change in formal texture reflects the change in thematic focus.

This section also lacks the same degree of parallelism found earlier in the hymn. Instead, it unfolds as a loosely structured list of blessings. The stylistic shift supports the interpretation of this passage as a coda rather than as part of the hymn’s core rhetorical structure.⁴⁹

10.39 Implications for the Synthesized Model

The Accession Hymn of Merneptah illustrates the advantages of the integrated approach proposed in this paper.

The verse divisions align with syntactic sense-units, as Burkard's model predicts.

The internal rhythm reflects the distribution of prosodic words, as Fecht's observations imply.

Parallelism structures the hymn's rhetoric, but variation in verse length reflects hierotaxis rather than numerology.

The hymn thus confirms that Egyptian poetry can be analyzed as syntactically grounded, prosodically stylized discourse, without recourse to speculative numerical schemes.

10.40 Conclusion (Revised)

The long-standing debate over Egyptian metre has often been framed as a choice between two incompatible models: Fecht's Kolon-based metrical system and Burkard's syntactic sense-unit approach. Each captures an important aspect of Egyptian poetic form, but neither alone provides a fully satisfactory account.

Fecht was right to insist that Egyptian literary texts are rhythmically structured and that this structure contributes to meaning. His emphasis on hierarchical organization, accentual grouping, and the legitimacy of both dyadic and triadic verse groupings remains foundational. However, his reliance on numerology and his willingness to override manuscript evidence weaken the historical plausibility of his reconstructions.

Burkard, by contrast, established the syntactic sense-unit as the secure foundation of verse structure and restored the centrality of parallelism. His model is textually accountable and methodologically restrained. Yet his tendency—shared with Foster—to treat the thought couplet as the default higher-level structure underestimates the frequency and rhetorical importance of triplets and larger groupings in Egyptian poetry.

The synthesized model proposed here integrates the strengths of both approaches. Egyptian verse consists of syntactically closed sense-units whose internal organization reflects a strong-stress prosodic pattern based on the distribution of prosodic words. These units nest into couplets, triplets, and larger clusters according to rhetorical and semantic demands, while hierotaxis explains variation in length and emphasis.

This framework preserves the integrity of the manuscript tradition, respects

the linguistic structure of Egyptian, and accounts for the perceptible rhythm of the texts. It allows us to describe Egyptian poetry as a form of stylized speech—neither rigidly metrical nor merely prosaic, but a disciplined and expressive medium shaped by both syntax and prosody.⁵⁰

The long-standing debate over Egyptian metre has often been framed as a choice between two incompatible models: Fecht's Kolon-based metrical system and Burkard's syntactic sense-unit approach. Each captures an important aspect of Egyptian poetic form, but neither alone provides a fully satisfactory account.

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Burkard, by contrast, established the syntactic sense-unit as the secure foundation of verse structure and restored the centrality of parallelism. His model is textually accountable and methodologically restrained. Yet by downplaying rhythmic patterning, it risks reducing Egyptian poetry to little more than stylized prose.

The synthesized model proposed here integrates the strengths of both approaches. Egyptian verse consists of syntactically closed sense-units whose internal organization reflects a strong-stress prosodic pattern based on the distribution of prosodic words. Parallelism governs multi-verse structures, while hierotaxis explains variation in length and emphasis.

This framework preserves the integrity of the manuscript tradition, respects the linguistic structure of Egyptian, and accounts for the perceptible rhythm of the texts. It allows us to describe Egyptian poetry as a form of stylized speech—neither rigidly metrical nor merely prosaic, but a disciplined and expressive medium shaped by both syntax and prosody.⁵⁰